DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 571 PS 006 497

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|---|---|
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| TITLE | Children's Understanding of Morals. |
| INSTITUTION | Cornell Univ., Ithaca, N.Y. Dept of Human Development and Family Studies. |
| PUB DATE | [71] |
| NOTE | 20p. |
| EDRS PRICE | MF-$0.65 HC Not Available from EDRS. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Age Differences; *Child Development; *Cognitive Development; Elementary Grades; Kindergarten; *Learning Theories; *Moral Development; Research Design; Secondary Grades; Statistical Data; *Student Testing; Test Results |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Piaget (Jean) |

ABSTRACT

Research efforts in the area of moral development of the child, as based on Piaget's theory, are discussed. Some of the important processes Piaget uses to explain cognitive growth are presented first, followed by his theory of how the individual's capacity for moral judgment evolves. The research discussed tests Piaget's chief underlying assumption that changes in cognitive structures are related directly to comparable changes in moral judgments. The hypotheses tested were: (1) authority-oriented moral judgments would develop concomitantly with the period of pre-operational thought, (2) as children move forward into the next stage of concrete operational thought, moral judgements would be based on cooperation and reciprocity, and (3) there would be a final stage of formal operations with moral judgments based on ideals. The general design of the study involved testing 195 boys (15 boys from kindergarten through 12th grade, with social class, sibling position, and IQ level held constant) on a series of six Piagetian tasks to assess their level of cognitive functioning. Levels of moral judgments were determined by his responses to nine different morally conflicting story situations. These stories were designed to measure a child's centration on authority vs. peer cooperation vs. humanitarian acts. Cognitive test scores were transformed into factor scores, which were related to the various modes of moral conceptualization. Pearsonian correlations were used to test the relationship between each cognitive component and each moral mode of response. The findings support Piaget's thesis of concomitant "growth" of the two modes of thought. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility.] (DB)

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# Children's Understanding of Morals

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At birth the child is pre-moral. He begins life incapable of moral judgments and moral behavior. As a neonate, he is bound only by sensations and impulses, but eventually he learns his culture and he becomes "moral". When and how does this transformation take place? What is the source of individual morality? What are the psychological processes involved in moral development?

What do we mean when we talk about morality? Morality has been defined as conscience, as a set of cultural rules of social action which have been internalized by the individual. The development of it has been conceived of as the increase in such internalization of "basic cultural rules" which involves conflicts and decisions that include others. Moral development, then, is one part of total social development. It is oriented toward the priority of values and concepts of rights and responsibilities regarding social situations.

Most theories of moral development are concerned with some aspect of the "internalization process" by which external standards, i.e., rules for social action become internal standards, i.e., individual moral values. However, theorists disagree about what is responsible for this internalization. In other words, what is the nature of this development. Some theorists favor the "stamping-in" notion and espouse an additive model of cognitive and moral development where an individual's growth is made up of a series of closer and closer approximations to some ideal standard. I shall not go into a tangent as to why this notion is inadequate in explaining the nature of moral development but will cite two contrasting stories given by Elliot Turiel (1969). He saw a 5 year-old whose uncle had told him that he had been in

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jail, although this was not true. At first the child refused to believe the uncle but finally did- and did not speak to the uncle for the rest of the day, but only glared at him from across the room. Furthermore, he refused to believe the uncle's later protest of innocence. Compare that story to the following story. When Thoreau was put in jail for civil disobedience, Emerson, very surprised to see him there, rushed to the window of the jail and said, "Henry, what are you doing in there?" Thoreau's reply was, "Waldo, what are you doing out there?" The 5 year-old has learned the moral standard of society (which may, of course, be completely wrong) that people who go to jail are bad; but Thoreau, who expresses the opposite of that standard, is certainly not a less moral person.

It is clear that a small child's thinking is not merely an imperfect copy of an adult's, but is structurally different. Thus, the input the individual receives from external circumstances is not the "same" regardless of his age; rather, it covaries with the changing cognitive structure of his mind to produce a response. By this time, you must have already guessed my bias, or should I say, values? My personal belief is that internalization of cultural standards is a spontaneous sequential development emanating from the interaction of the child's cognitive growth and his social environment. This bias has its roots in Piaget's theory of moral development published when he was the co-director of the Rousseau Institute in Geneva back in 1932.

My research efforts in the area of moral development have been solely based on Piaget's theory. In order to understand my research efforts it is necessary to have a clear notion of Piaget's theory of intellectual development and the basic mechanisms of development which he espouses.

First, we will examine some of the important processes Piaget uses to explain development. He believes that there are four factors, each necessary

but not sufficient, for development to proceed normally. First in importance is the internal factor of physical growth or maturation. For example, a child who has not developed coordination of vision and prehension, who cannot reach for and grasp an object, cannot develop concepts dependent on these organic abilities. Second, experience and exercise of actions performed on objects are essential for development. Piaget believes that to know something, one has to act on it, manipulate it, and explore it. Third, social interaction and cultural transmission are other external factors necessary for optimal development. For example by playing with his peers the child learns that there are other points of view besides his own. Finally, Piaget posits an equilibration factor. He feels that if development depends on both external and internal factors, then there must be a process which provides a balance and integration of these factors. When a child is learning, he is active and therefore is faced with an external disturbance. Each time the child has to cope with a new experience (disturbance), the equilibration process works to achieve balance between that external disturbance and the internal state of the child.

How are these compensations that Piaget talks about achieved? Equilibrium or balance is attained by two complementary processes--assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation can be viewed as the process of feedback and feed-forward which operates when the individual attempts to integrate each successive experience into his own personally meaningful system. Experiences that can be assimilated must be based on the child's actions in his environment, and they must be fairly consistent with his present system of thinking or his conceptual framework. The second process, accommodation, can be viewed as the compensatory system whereby the individual's personal mental system of concepts is altered in response to the assimilated actions.

It is obvious that the whole process of equilibration involves change in

the child's mental system toward greater understanding. Assimilation filters the experiential input, and the process of accommodation allows alteration in existing structures to handle the new knowledge. In this way, we see that attainment of knowledge or socialization is not merely an imitation of experiences, but rather, a modification and transformation of such experience. This adaptive process is continuous from birth and is essential for development of cognitive structures.

While assimilation and accommodation are the processes involved in transition from one stage to another, Piaget sees decentration as the essential mechanism for the achievement of equilibrium which is associated with transition. Decentration is the movement from one focus to another--from the self to the immediate realities of a situation, to abstract conceptualizations of these realities. Thus, through decentration a higher level or greater capacity for judgment emerges. The mechanism of decentration is essential because it promotes, through the individual's realization of new points of view, changes in the balance of assimilation and accommodation which in turn set the equilibration process in motion.

Piaget believes that there are three main stages of cognitive development. They are distinguished by the cognitive structures which the individual has at his disposal for dealing with the world. All children must go through all of them in the proper order; however, the ages at which they pass through any of them are not of real concern to Piaget. As a matter of fact, he does not seem to address himself to the question of individual differences in rate of cognitive growth, except in a few places, and then only briefly. What he has to say about individual differences will be more comprehensible when I talk about moral development, so I will postpone discussion of that until then.

The first stage of cognitive development is the sensory motor stage, lasting from birth until about eighteen months of age. It corresponds to the initial pre-verbal, pre-symbolic period of life.

The infant comes into the world with two kinds of reflexes--those that are not alterable by experience, such as knee jerks, Babinski, etc., and those that are modifiable by experience, such as grasping and sucking, etc. It is during this stage that practical knowledge is developed through the use of these modifiable reflexes. Using these reflexes, the infant actively carries on countless transactions involving space, time, matter, etc., which build and reshape his developing systems of interrelated concepts (cognitive structures). The resulting structures are the foundations which form the basis of later representational thought. Consider, for example, the developing capacity for object permanence. In the early stages of development, an object no longer exists for the infant when it disappears from his visual field; therefore, he makes no effort to find it. When the infant gets older he tries to find the displaced object, for he knows that the object continues to exist. The infant carries out a physical search for the object rather than using covert thought processes, for he cannot represent the displacement in his mind. He finds the object by localizing it spatially through sensory motor processes; thus, along with the construction of object permanence, there comes the construction of practical or sensory-motor space. Piaget postulates that these series of actions which are the basic structures are indispensible for the structure of later representational thought. Lack of decentration is evident in this stage. The child begins any operation or act in terms of himself. For example, in the sensory motor period the child views the world as a series of momentary and moving pictures which revolve around his own body. Causality to the child

may be only actions that he exerts; these actions are neither objectified nor localized by him. However, as the child develops and attains the final phase of sensory motor development, the world is seen as one space, one causality. Decentration from the self takes place; thus, object permanence emerges.

The second stage is the stage of concrete operations; it lasts until approximately ten to eleven years of age. It contains two sub-stages, pre-operational (or formation) and operational (or attainment); these sub-stages are distinguished by the formation and the attainment of reversibility in problem-solving behavior. The child in the pre-operational sub-stage, although he is capable of internal representation of experience, cannot solve a problem which requires that he perform an operation of reversibility in his head. This can be illustrated by one of the conservation problems; its solution requires that the child mentally reverse the sequence of his perceptions. For example, two beakers are presented to the child with equal amounts of liquid in each. Then the liquid in one beaker is poured into a thinner beaker (thus raising its height in the container). The child is then asked if the amount of liquid in the two beakers is the same or if one or the other has more. The pre-operational child will say that there is now a different amount of liquid in each. There are two possible ways he might have solved the problem correctly: one is negation, or undoing mentally the pouring he has just seen, which requires knowing that a cognitive process can take place in opposite directions (e.g., adding and subtracting, joining and separating, pouring into a different sized container and pouring back). The other is reciprocity, or compensation in one dimension for another, which in this problem would lead him to see that, although the tall beaker has a higher level, it is not as wide.

Why can't the pre-operational child perform these operations? He probably can use empirical reversibility; that is, if the experimenter pours the liquid

back into the original container, he will say they are equal. The crux of the issue again is decentration; the child is centered on his immediate perceptions and on one perceptual dimension at a time. He has not decentered enough to take into account transformations; perceptual states hold his attention.

In the period of attainment, the child has mastered the processes of negation and reciprocity; indeed, if the experimenter tries to convince him of outcomes contrary to these processes, the child will consider it absurd. Despite the child's excellent grasp of each process, he still cannot use them simultaneously; this ability will not appear until the next stage of cognitive development.

Finally, in the third stage of development, formal operations, this limitation to concrete operations is removed and the two forms of reversibility are united into one operation. At this point in development, the child reaches the level of formal hypothetical deductive operations. The child can now reason about hypotheses and is not limited to objects. He can construct new operations and then systematically combine the propositions so as to test all possible combinations. This double reversibility permits a greater degree of mobility and coherence of formal thought.

How does moral development fit into all this? Consider first what aspect of morality Piaget examines--moral judgment. The child's moral judgments will reflect the same structures as the child exhibits in his cognitive judgments. Thus, Piaget does not look for the presence of specific knowledge (e.g., one should not steal), but rather at the way the child arrives at his judgment and the reasons he gives for it.

How does Piaget think the individual's capacity for moral judgment evolves? Along with the cognitive growth which we have just discussed, there is concomitant emotional growth; Piaget calls this affective development. Affect

is the force or energy behind behavior and it is developed from early relationships with others. Affective and cognitive development are interdependent, although neither cause the other.

Piaget believes that the capacity for moral judgment dayevelops from this affective base. Since it evolves concomitantly with cognitive structures, it reflects the same processes. For example, a child who has learned to look at an intellectual problem from several points of view is also able to take into account the points of view of others in his emotional relationships. A younger child who has not achieved this level of decentration cannot suspend his own immediate perception in either case, cognitive or emotional problem solving. Furthermore, the child must achieve decentration in both domains, for the two are inseparable. Here we can see the importance of social experience, because it is through interaction with others that the child learns there are points of view other than his own. Piaget implies that the child who does not have adequate social experience to achieve decentration in the affective realm will also not achieve it in the cognitive realm. He also implies that it is the affective component which accounts for some of the individual differences in cognitive growth. Let us now re-examine the three stages of cognitive development for their affective components.

Piaget's (1948, 1969) explanation of affective development in the sensory motor period is a pre-moral stage, but its progress is crucial for further moral development. Piaget agrees with Anna Freud, who posited that this initial period is one of "primary narcissism" in which there is an initial lack of differentiation between the self and the "other". Insofar as the self remains undifferentiated and thus unconscious of itself, all affectivity is centered on the child's own body and action. Later in this stage there is a decentering of affectivity onto the person who has cared for the child. When

the child ceases to relate everything to his own state and to his own action and begins to substitute a universe of permanent objects structured according to causality, his affectivity also becomes attached to the localizable, permanent objects that his caretakers come to be. Hence the formation of "object relations" (initial affectivity for other persons)-is in close connection with the development of object permanence.

In this initial phase of the concrete operational period (2-7 years) moral feelings emerge from the disciplines of the parents who demand unilateral obedience. Thus, the centration here has moved from the child himself to adult authority. During this state whenever moral feelings do exist, conservation is absent. That is, a child at this stage can carry out certain rules imposed by parents, but the permanence of the reaction is not yet established. When the parents are absent, these rules are not followed because there is no external control. Rules imposed and carried out during this period are not generalized and, therefore, not conserved (just as the quantity of water is not conserved when it is poured into a different beaker). For example, Piaget found that children during this period feel that to tell the truth is an obligation toward parents, but they can lie to peers since this has never been forbidden. Instructions not to lie are accepted at a particular time or for a particular situation, without any kind of generalization. Due to the child's lack of reversible thought operations, such moral demands are "external" to the child, and therefore appear to him as though they were physical phenomena.

In play with peers, the child in the period of formation believes the rules were handed down by an external authority (Daddy or God, usually) and cannot be changed. Nevertheless, children until about age 7 consent to many changes in the rules--this seems to be a contradiction, but it is understandable in terms of how well the child knows the rules. Each child believes that he knows

a set of rules; however, usually each child plays by a different set which he grasps so poorly that he accepts changes by another person as though they were corrections, especially from an authority figure. So children from about four to seven play the "same" game happily side by side, concentrating on their own performance, and not checking up on one another. "Winning" is "having a good time", so everybody wins and nobody loses. After this period, they know the rules, but until about age ten, they still consider them immutable.

In a question of assigning blame or punishment, the child's unilateral respect (focus on a superior authority) leads to moral realism. That is, the child makes moral judgments on the basis of "real", not subjective, concerns. For instance, if a child is asked who should receive severe punishment or is more to blame, a boy who breaks many cups which he didn't know were behind a door he opened in response to his mother's call or a boy who breaks one cup sneaking some cookies, the pre-operational child considers the first child more to blame and prescribes a more severe punishment for him. His justification is in terms of the amount of damage; the first child broke more cups than the second. The question of intention is not at issue. Similarly, a child who tells a whopper playfully is considered more at fault than one who tells a small lie maliciously.

Piaget calls this morality of obedience and realism, heteronomy. This declines to make way for autonomy, which is based on mutual respect, rather than on blind obedience to authority. Autonomy first manifests itself in game-playing in a stage of incipient cooperation, where children have mastered the rules and are able to agree on a set which everyone will play by in order to play the game fairly; however, autonomy does not really replace heteronomy until the child has a good sense of mutual respect, which is based on reciprocity of esteem.

The acquistion of autonomy in the moral sphere corresponds to the sub-stage of attainment of concrete operations. With advances in social co-operation and the decline of constraints by authority, the child arrives at new moral relationships based on mutual respect. These new moral feelings are equivalent to conservation in the cognitive domain. The child attains a decentration from authority in the form of reciprocity. For example, a child may first learn to share his toys through the demands of the mother. The actions the child carries out at first are not because of an underlying understanding of the basis of sharing, but because of a unilateral obedience to the mother. However, when the mother is absent, the child ceases to share his toys. Peers' reactions to his unwillingness cause a "disturbance" state in the child due to their unwillingness to play with him further. Repeated disturbances of this kind are finally equilibrated through assimilation and accommodation until the child reaches a cognitive capacity for reversible thought operations. He is then able to conserve the actions of sharing through reasoning and reciprocity resulting in a basic understanding of mutual cooperation. Such reciprocal morality is also an autonomous morality, since it is no longer related to transactions between authority and the child, but between peers on an equal basis. However, at this initial stage of autonomous morality the child is now centered on the real, the immediate, and the concrete situations with their associated inflexibility. This inflexibility is illustrated in the prominence of the feeling of justice in interactions between children of the same age. With the attainment of formal operational thought, new moral feelings are added to and integrated with the preceding feelings, all of which correspond to these new operational structures. Due to the mobility anf flexibility of thought at this more advanced stage, feelings become decentered from persons or material realities and become more adequate for dealing with social realities.

ideal realities, e.g., humanitarianism,which is the ideological stage of autonomous morality.

In conclusion we see that Piaget believes that the child progresses from a stage of sensory motor lack of morality, to a stage of pre-operational thought to that of concrete operational thought and finally to a stage of formal operational thought. In terms of the centration-decentration process, the child moves from centration on himself, to centration on authority, to centration on objects, and finally to a higher level of decentration in which he is able to deal with ideals and social realities. In the realm of moral judgment, this means that the child progresses from a stage of heteronomy and unilateral respect to one of autonomy and mutual respect. Thus, Piaget asserts that growth in moral judgment is necessarily a concomitant of intellectual development. (For clarification, an outline of Piaget's system is presented in Table 1).

These hypotheses posed by Piaget certainly sound plausible. The research (Lee, 1971) I am about to discuss specifically tests Piaget's chief underlying assumption that changes in cognitive structures are related directly to comparable changes in moral judgments. The explicit hypotheses then are: 1) authority oriented moral judgments would develop concomitantly with the period of pre-operational thought, 2) as children move forward into the next stage of concrete operational thought, moral judgments would be based on cooperation and reciprocity, and 3) there would be a final stage of formal operations with moral judgments based on ideals.

The general design of the study involved the testing of 193 boys (15 boys from kindergarten through twelfth grade, with social class, sibling position and IQ level held constant) on a series of six Piagetian tasks to assess their level of cognitive functioning.

Each boy's performance of these cognitive tasks was used to predict his

to nine different morally conflicting story situations. These stories were designed to measure a child's orientation on authority vs. peer cooperation vs. humanitarian acts.

The main interest of the present investigation was to ascertain whether there exists a relationship between cognitive and moral modes of thought, and if such relationships exist, how they relate to each other. The original cognitive test scores were not used directly, since this study was interested in testing Piaget's hypothesis of differential cognitive structures in relation to the different levels of moral conceptualization. Factor analysis was done to identify the separate (orthogonal) components of the cognitive stages. Each subject's six cognitive test scores were transformed into factor scores defining the three separate cognitive components of: 1) general cognition, 2) concrete operations, and 3) formal operations. These factor scores were used to related to the various modes of moral conceptualization. Pearsonian correlations were used to test the relationship between each cognitive component and each moral mode of response, thus producing the correlational matrix presented in Table 2. The general cognitive component, as an overall predictor, provided the best predictions on all levels of moral conceptualization. However, it is also highly related to age. The concrete operations component is a good predictor of decrease of authority responses, while the formal operations is a good predictor of societal responses. These two specific components of cognition are not as highly related to age as the general cognitive component. Since both modes of thought are influenced by increasing age, an attempt was made to eliminate their common dependence on it. As can be observed in Table 2, the general cognitive component's relationship to the different moral modes of responses has markedly decreased, while the two specific cognitive components

and their relationships to the various moral modes of response did not change substantially when age was partialled out.

According to Piaget's theoretical conceptualization, age 10 is the approximate age when the onset of formal operations takes place. The sample was, therefore, divided into two subsamples, one made of Ss age 5 through 10 and the other 10 through 17. A post hoc analysis was made of this data. Table 3 shows the relationships obtained between the moral and cognitive modes of thought for the two subsamples. In general, it shows that the concrete component of cognitive functioning is best related to a decrease of authority type responses independent of age, and to concomitant increases in reciprocity responses in the moral modes of conceptualization. The formal operations component of cognitive functioning is best related to the increase of societal type responses.

Further support that cognitive and moral modes of thought covary according to their respective modes of conceptualization is found in the transition functions among the two dimensions as age progresses. Using a special case of the point biserial correlation, the transition functions were found to be dissimilar within the individual modes of thought but similar across modes of thought. Figure 1 shows that the cognitive domain of negation is related to a decreasing function of authority responses. Figure 2 shows that the reciprocal cognitive functions are positively related to reciprocity in the moral realm, and Figure 3 shows that the formal operations are related to the societal mode of moral conceptualization. If the transition functions were compared within the two dimensions, the functions are dissimilar. Thus, the findings clearly support Piaget's thesis of concomitant "growth" of the two modes of thought.

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Table 1

| Stages | Cognitive Structures | Affective structures (Moral development) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Sensory motor | Available reflexes are used to develop knowledge<br>Child is active<br>Child is egocentric<br>Little notion of causality<br>No end object permanence develops | (From as Freud)<br>Child does not differentiate self from "other"<br>Primary narcissism<br>No end-object relations develops, differentiation takes place, child begins to be attached to caretaker |
| 2. Pre-operational (a) Formation | Language begins<br>No conservation or reversibility<br>Centered on one aspect<br>Lack of logic | Child obeys parents unilateral respect when parents are absent disobeys<br>No cooperation<br>Heteronomy<br>Child is centered on authority |
| (b) Attainment | Reversible processes<br>simultaneous operations<br>Reciprocity<br>Can conserve<br>Concrete objects important | Autonomy<br>Mutual respect cooperation<br>Equal with peers<br>Child is centered on real situations, persons, objects<br>Justice is important |
| 3. Formal Operational (adolescent +) | Deductive thought<br>Not limited to objects<br>Can construct hypothetically | Decentered from situations<br>Can deal with ideal situations humanitarianism etc<br>Ideology |

| Cognitive Components | Moral Levels | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Authority | Authority Reciprocity | Reciprocity | Societal | Chronological Age |
| General | -104* | -365* | 264* | 611* | 789* |
| | (-373)* | (-102) | (281)* | | |
| Concrete | -529* | 139 | 186 | 064 | 111 |
| | (-546)* | | | | |
| [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | -008 | 505* | 520* |
| | | | | (021)* | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | |

Older Group: Age 10 through 17

| Cognitive Components | Moral Level: Authority | Authority Reciprocity | Reciprocity | Societal | Chronological Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| General | -264* | -414* | 106 | 281* | 500* |
| | (-208) | (-316)* | | (186) | |
| Concrete | 238 | 224 | 118 | -396* | -429* |
| | | | | (-216) | |
| Formal | -237* | -315* | 109 | 443* | 432* |
| | (-201 | (-311 | | (384)* | |
| IQ | -183 | 311* | 165 | 250 | |

*p < .01

df = 118
df = 117

Note: Figures in parentheses are first-order correlations when age was partialled out

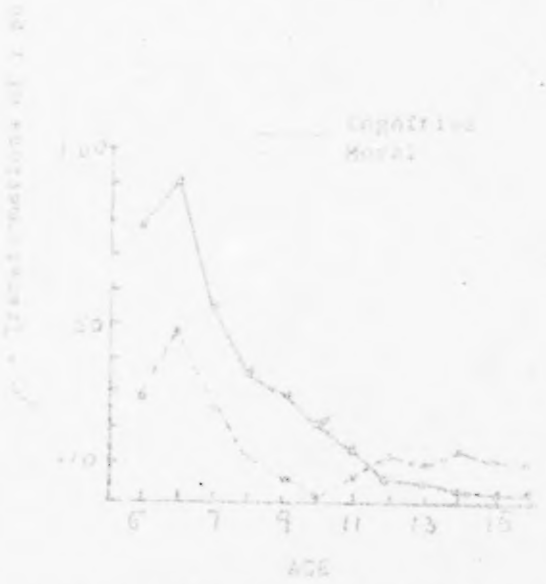


Figure 1. Transition Functions for the Cognitive Tasks of Reciprocal Operations and Moral Judgment Based on Reciprocity.

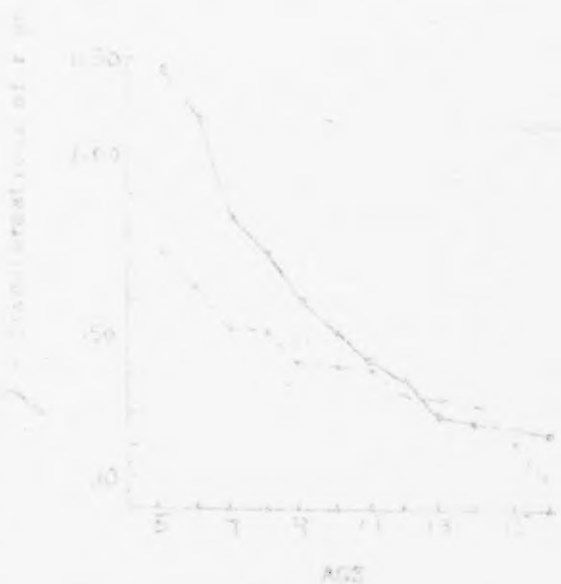


Figure 2. Transition for the Cognitive Tasks of Negation and Moral Judgment Based on Authority

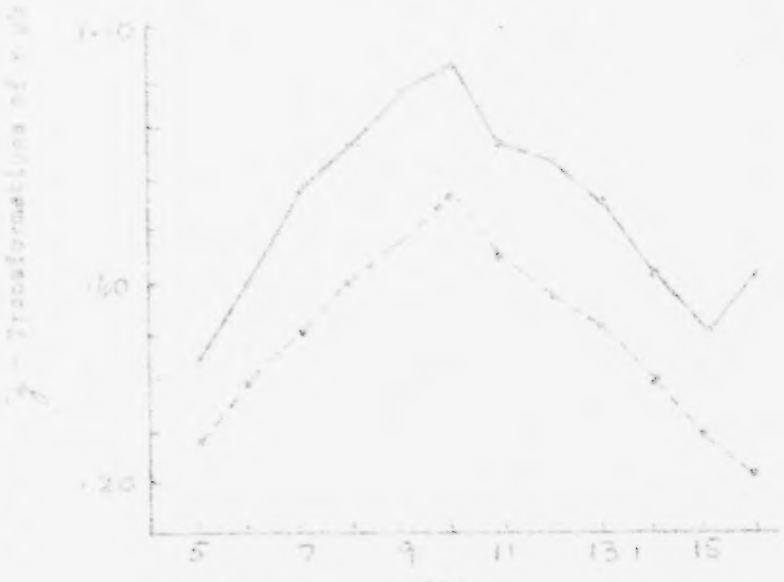


Figure 3. Transition Functions for the Cognitive Tasks of Formal Operations and Moral Judgment Based on Authority